

Beyond the Law: Wendy Lawrence on Leadership, Risk and the Modern University CLO

Interviews and Profiles



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ACC Interview conducted by Justin Connor

As Chief Legal Officer of Toronto Metropolitan University, Wendy Lawrence operates at the intersection of law, strategy, institutional mission and rapid change. Drawing on a career that began in healthcare, Lawrence has learned that succeeding as a CLO requires much more than legal expertise. It requires judgment, relationships, business acumen and an ability to anticipate what comes next.

For Wendy Lawrence, the path to the chief legal officer's chair was shaped as much by the responsibilities she took on outside traditional legal practice as by the legal work itself. As General Counsel of Toronto Metropolitan University, Lawrence applied those lessons to help guide Toronto Metropolitan University through transformational growth including the establishment of a new school of medicine, expansion within Canada's largest city, and solidifying the university's position as an innovator in higher education.



Wendy Lawrence, General Counsel, Corporate Secretary, & Chief Privacy Officer, Toronto Metropolitan University

Lawrence, Chief Legal Officer of Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), began her in-house career in healthcare, an environment where law, risk and consequential decision-making are constantly intertwined. As her career progressed, mentors encouraged her to assume leadership responsibilities, first for the privacy team, and later for the enterprise risk and compliance functions, alongside her legal portfolio. Those assignments proved formative.

They taught her something she now sees as fundamental to the CLO role: being the organization's most senior lawyer is not principally a reward for accumulating the most legal knowledge. It is a leadership job.

"The general counsel role is ... a complex one," Lawrence says."Deep legal expertise gets you to the table, but the role itself goes far beyond that." Relationship building, leadership, change management, strategic planning and business acumen can prove every bit as important.

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That perspective has served Lawrence particularly well at TMU, where the legal department supports an institution she describes as something akin to a "small, highly complex village." A university educates students, employs professors, researchers and staff, owns and operates real estate, functions within elaborate external and internal regulatory frameworks and must reconcile the sometimes competing interests of a remarkably diverse community.

TMU adds another dimension. Its campus is deeply embedded in downtown Toronto, and the

university has built a reputation around innovation and experiential learning. Lawrence arrived as TMU was preparing to open a new medical school, giving her an opportunity both to help build something new and to draw upon her previous experience in the hospital sector.

The result is a CLO role in which conventional notions of simply “minimizing risk” are often inadequate. Lawrence describes her work instead as an exercise in balancing: protecting the institution and meeting its legal obligations while respecting the university’s mission as a place for learning, opportunity, and the exchange of ideas.

That balancing act is becoming more complicated. Artificial intelligence is simultaneously challenging traditional models of academic assessment and becoming a technology students will need to understand in the workforce. Geopolitical and policy changes can outpace legislation and require lawyers to advise organizations before settled legal answers exist. Lawrence sees those developments not merely as risks, but as an opportunity for in-house lawyers to move further upstream in institutional decision-making.



It is a philosophy reflected in Lawrence’s involvement with the Association of Corporate Counsel as well. As former Vice President of ACC Ontario, Lawrence first encountered ACC when she was a relatively new in-house lawyer without other lawyers working alongside her day to day. What she found was not simply another professional association, but a community of lawyers facing many of the same pressures and questions.

That community, she says, has remained important throughout her career, giving her access to practical education, professional relationships and even a trusted mentor with whom she has discussed consequential career decisions.

In a conversation with ACC, Lawrence discussed her path to the CLO role, what makes higher education such an interesting environment for an in-house lawyer, the impact of AI, the importance of professional community and why the future may increasingly belong to lawyers who can anticipate risk rather than simply react to it.

Q&A with Toronto Metropolitan University's Wendy Lawrence

ACC: Let’s go right back to the beginning. What led you personally into a legal career, and how did your career ultimately take you to the general counsel role?

Wendy Lawrence: I have wanted to be a lawyer for as long as I can remember. I was someone who

always liked school, and I liked learning, so I felt law would be an extension of that, and I'm sure, of course, a TV show or two may have had some kind of influence on me along the way.

But once I started practicing, I found myself drawn to the files where risk and issues management were a component, and I think that interest in risk management made the healthcare sector, where I began my in-house counsel journey, a really good fit for me.

Along that journey, I was fortunate to have really great mentors, great colleagues and managers in the form of general counsel that I reported to. Many of those individuals encouraged me to take on increasing leadership responsibilities, both informal and formal. And that led to me taking on, eventually, the management of first the privacy team, and then, leadership of the risk and compliance functions, in addition to my legal counsel responsibilities.

Those added roles ended up serving me well for a future general counsel role because those roles really gave me experience in those softer skills of leadership, change management and strategic planning, which are so critical to the role of general counsel, but are skills you really don't pick up in law school or pick up in your early training as a lawyer.

The general counsel role, I found, is a complex one — deep legal expertise gets you to the table, but the role itself goes far beyond that. It's the combination of legal knowledge with those broader leadership skills of relationship building and strategy leadership and business acumen. And I found those leadership assignments along the way were really critical to preparing me for a GC role and really solidified my interest in that.

ACC: You made a significant pivot from healthcare into higher education. What made becoming General Counsel at Toronto Metropolitan University attractive to you?

Lawrence: Certainly, it was a big decision, because working in healthcare is incredibly rewarding. When your office is located in the hospital building, you can see the impact you're making on patients and their well-being.

I was really attracted to the opportunity for a few reasons. There actually are quite a lot of similarities between hospitals and universities. They're both highly regulated. They're both mission-driven organizations, and both healthcare and education are incredibly important services for the public.

With respect to Toronto Metropolitan University, or TMU as we call it for short, in particular, it was an organization I was always interested in because of its identity of being bold and innovative and its strong urban footprint in the City of Toronto.

It was also a newer, growing university, which was intriguing. At the time I joined, TMU was about to open a medical school, and that was exciting to me because as General Counsel, I had an opportunity to contribute to building something. Additionally, TMU was establishing a new medical school not to just open a new school, but to alleviate gaps in the health care system. This opportunity allowed me to rely on some of my past expertise in the hospital sector and contribute to an important milestone for the university. So really, the decision was a combination of factors, and it really was perfect timing for a career move.

ACC: What is distinctive about serving as the chief legal officer of a university?

Lawrence: I think what is really unique about universities is that their campuses make them a small, kind of highly complex village of their own.

They're providing education to students, but some of those students live on campus. The universities also manage and own land and buildings, and they have really complex regulatory frameworks consisting both of external laws, but also internal policies and processes that govern academics and life on campus.

And then accompanying that is really the university community. There are a number of people that compose the university community, and their roles and their legal relationships with the school vary. They include students, of course, but there's also professors, there's researchers and a variety of staff that take care of operating the university.

And an added complexity is that Toronto Metropolitan University is a downtown campus, and it's embedded, both physically and culturally, into the City of Toronto.

All this makes the breadth of legal issues that a GC encounters very broad, and coupled with the growth and innovation agenda of TMU, requires the legal team to have a solid understanding of both the legal framework and the business to enable the organization to pursue growth responsibly.

ACC: Your experience with ACC eventually led you into chapter leadership, where you served as Vice President of ACC Ontario. What originally brought you to ACC, and what kept you involved?

Lawrence: I first became involved by attending an event when I was in my first in-house counsel role, and in that particular organization, I was the only lawyer, reporting to a general counsel. In that structure, I didn't really have lawyer colleagues and I was also new to the in-house practice of law.

And so I went to this event, which was attended by many in-house lawyers, and I thought, wow, what a wonderful opportunity to connect, share ideas, and discuss common challenges. At that first meeting, I met so many incredible connections, that I continued to attend both networking events and education events. But I think right there, I saw the importance of community and the community that ACC offered.

What makes the programming unique — and particularly valuable — is that it goes beyond the substantive law, offering practical tips and guidance from other in-house lawyers that you can apply immediately to your own role. I find it to be so relevant to the in-house counsel context.

ACC: What has your leadership involvement with ACC Ontario taught you?

Lawrence: I think certainly my involvement in ACC Ontario has impressed upon me the importance of community for in-house lawyers.

Being an in-house counsel is incredibly rewarding, but the role brings a unique set of challenges — and that's where strong networks and communities come in. That need for a shared professional community is what initially made the ACC so important to me.

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And what's unique about this community is it's run by in-house counsel, for in-house counsel, so the events, the information, and the areas of focus are really relevant and really tailored to helping in-house counsel carry out their roles effectively.

It's a source, I think, of connection, which is also so important for professional development. I know when I've organized sessions in my role in chapter leadership such as the Data Roundtable, I've had lawyers come up to me after and thank me. Whether it sparked a great idea, raised a challenge everyone was feeling, or provided a platform to share initiatives, the roundtable was a valuable source or connection for those lawyers.

So, I think that community is what makes it so important, and the need for community is what I feel I've learned.

ACC: AI is reshaping virtually every industry. From where you sit, how is it changing higher education and the work of your own legal department?

Lawrence: Certainly, it is changing the equation for universities like many organizations, and it's changing for us in a number of ways.

On the academic side, there are questions of academic integrity and whether traditional ways of evaluating students can continue to be used. That's one issue that is continually being explored.

At the same time, universities, and particularly Toronto Metropolitan University, really pride ourselves in preparing students for the workforce, and the reality is that AI is a component of that workforce. So I think it's important for us to prepare our students to use this tool — but to do so responsibly and considerately.

And I think with all tools, access is an issue. I was part of the university's generative AI working group, and one of the things we wanted to make sure of was that AI stays accessible. So one of TMU's guiding principles as it explores AI is ensuring all students have access to this tool.

Beyond the classroom, certainly we're looking at it in carrying out our operations. My team has an annual retreat, and at our most recent retreat, we had AI as the theme. We invited one of the

university's professors to speak to us about AI and the opportunities from an academic perspective. We then had our colleagues in IT show us how to use these tools and give us examples of legal use cases which we explored together at the retreat.

And then finally, our department put together department guidelines for the use of AI to ensure that we are using AI responsibly while considering our professional obligations as lawyers.

ACC: With AI, geopolitical developments and policy changes all moving rapidly, what do you see as the larger opportunity for general counsel over the next few years?

Lawrence: I think the current landscape for universities presents a number of challenges and opportunities. It can be hard to keep pace with the uncertainty and the speed of changes we are seeing on issues such as tariffs and international students; they require lawyers to have a strong understanding of the legal framework whether it is termination clauses in contract templates or government directives, so that they can assume a seat at the advisory table with internal clients and weigh risks practically. That said, this environment presents an opportunity for lawyers to move from a reactive role into an anticipatory, strategic role.

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We are no longer waiting for legislation or responding to lawsuits, but rather facilitating solutions and paths forward. We are also being creative about how we can respond, whether that's responding with an internal policy, providing workforce guidance on responsibly using AI, or thinking about how best to future-proof our contracts.

This strategic role requires lawyers to focus on responding to risk rather than risk elimination; leveraging our understanding of risk to help navigate change and really be a true business partner.

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